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SUBJECT: BRITISH COLUMBIA GRUDGINGLY MOVES TOWARD PROVINCIAL
ELECTIONS

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¶1. Summary: British Columbia heads into May 12 provincial elections with a sagging economy and a fairly apathetic voting public. Premier Gordon Campbell's BC Liberals maintain a slight lead in polling but the real battle will be fought riding-by-riding, with the NDP moving closer, especially in the interior and on Vancouver Island. Key issues are the economy and crime, which should be the BC Liberals' issues. The contest is really theirs to lose but missteps by both parties, and a general lack of enthusiasm for either leader, are leaving BC voters looking for their "Obama." The winner in the end will be the party that is able to get their faithful to the polls in the largest numbers. End Summary.

Nobody's Perfect

¶2. BC will elect 85 MLAs on May 12. With six new seats and many incumbents not returning, almost thirty percent of the members will be new faces. The economy is the number one issue for the elections. The past eight years have seen tremendous growth in BC's economy and the BC Liberals hope to use their record of economic stewardship to win the election. But the economic tailspin is hitting home and recent numbers, especially rapidly rising unemployment figures for BC, are putting a damper on Campbell's campaign slogan "Keep B.C. Strong." Campbell's attacks on NDP leader Carole James' lack of economic experience resonate in the business community and suburban lower mainland. But the NDP maintains a strong lead in the interior and on Vancouver Island, areas hit hardest by the forestry industry collapse. According to political watchers we have contacted, Campbell is so unpopular in these areas he was urged by advisors not to appear with the candidates and to leave the campaigning to the locals.

¶3. Crime is the second most important issue in most BC polls. Again, the BC Liberals have traditionally had the upper hand with this issue in elections, but the spate of gang violence over the past 18 months has taken its toll on the public's perception of their ability to handle the problem. Several high profile and sweeping arrests in the past few weeks have boosted the BC Liberal's position. But the resignation of John van Dongen from the Solicitor General position, the province's top cop, over speeding tickets has proven a big embarrassment for Campbell and his BC Liberals.

¶4. A big embarrassment for Carole James and the NDP has been criticism from what would normally be her own constituency over her stance against BC's carbon tax. The carbon tax has been controversial since its inception last July and James was hoping to build on her opposition to this policy as a cornerstone of her campaign. But her opposition to the tax backfired when several prominent environmentalists, including Canada's most famous environmentalist, David Suzuki, strongly criticized her position. In his press conference, Suzuki did not take a clear political stance against the NDP, but he showed visible anger at

James and, according to one of our press contacts, all but called her a hypocrite. The issue is primarily an urban/suburban concern impacting marginal BC Liberal ridings targeted by the NDP and demonstrates disunity among its base that is costing the NDP.

Single Transferable Vote - Say What?

¶5. B.C. residents are also facing a ballot initiative that could significantly change the way Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are elected in the future. The single transferable vote (STV) proposal would alter the province's electoral system from first-past-the-post to a system of larger ridings where voters would rank order candidates and a complex counting system would determine multiple representatives. The system would send to the legislature not only the top vote getter, but as many as seven contenders, depending on the size of the riding and the percentage of votes received. The STV system first appeared on the provincial ballot in 2005 and fell just two percentage points short of the 60 percent of votes needed to change the law. Supporters of the system are hoping to make up that deficit this time and get the system approved. Proponents claim it is a fairer and more representative system that would allow smaller parties (such as the Greens) a better chance to be included in the provincial government. However polls show most voters do not really understand how STV works and, with the economy so prominent on voters' minds, the requirement to get 60 percent for adoption may be out of reach for such an obscure issue.

¶6. Comment: If the BC Liberals can galvanize their base and hit hard on their economic record they will be the party forming the next provincial government. But missteps, apathy and Gordon Campbell's lackluster popularity are hurting the party. Carole

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James is viewed more favorably as a person, but while a recent post-debate poll had James narrowly winning the event, Campbell won the question of who looked more like a premier. With no one grabbing the public's attention as an outright leader, the race is shaping up as a race to the polls, literally. Whoever gets his constituency out in the biggest numbers is going to win and, in that regard, everything from the traffic to the weather could determine the next provincial government. End Comment.
CHICOLA